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Classroom Civility

 [all in allthings.org/classroom-civility/](https://allthings.org/classroom-civility/)

Chelsea Maxwell

Presently, I hold one of the most undervalued occupations in this country: I am a student. I am proud of this title, and I dread the day when I will have to finally relinquish it. However, even though the title will disappear, my desire to learn will not. Learning is not about facts and definitions, it is a journey, and it is just as much about my relationship with God as it is my comprehension of the syllabus' topic of the day. Where there is a thirst to learn, there is a desire to seek intimacy with God. Learning is a process of questions and exploration, and it inherently encompasses a yearning for a deeper understanding of God's creation. It also inherently results in growth. Learning is a sacred, lifelong experience, and the classroom is a central component.

It is within the classroom, however, that the beauty of learning tends to fall apart.

Every class I have ever been a part of has been unique. There is something special about how the students of a class relate to each other and the professor that creates a distinctive atmosphere. These relationships, the community formed, are foundational to the learning that is to take place. For a classroom to properly house this experience, it must be a safe, civil environment. Failure to cultivate, establish and maintain such a space is where the degeneration of the learning experience begins.

I was fortunate enough to attend a high school that recognized the importance of such classroom civility. Within a majority of my classes, energetic debates and discussions that challenged our thinking occurred. Instead of experiencing overwhelming anxiety when throwing out an idea, asking a question, or pointing out flaws in generally accepted norms, there was a prevailing curiosity. Questioning was encouraged, and at the conclusion of a class there was no regret in what was said, for every person was treated with respect: they had time to speak, and an opportunity to respond to argument-focused criticism. The point of learning is not to be right, or even to find the right answer. As flawed, fallen human beings, that is impossible. The point is to ask the questions. However, without civility in our classrooms there is not a safe place for this process to easily transpire.

The classroom should be a place where we become skilled at questioning others and where we learn to question ourselves. Within classrooms we should explore ideas, concepts, theories, and worldviews different from our own. Provocative thoughts should be expressed and explored. Considering challenging and provoking ideas is not equivalent to accepting them, and classrooms should be the place where these types of ideas are first presented to us so that we can become equipped in investigating and discussing them. If we as students do not learn how to hold these conversations with civility now, in the safety and security of a classroom, then when will we? In the face of adversity, when our opinions and ideas are tested, and they will be, are we doomed to become defensive and aggressive? Disagreements do not lead to the breakdown of community. Being in a healthy community does not mean everyone thinks the same way, or holds identical beliefs and values. It is our inability and reluctance to explore controversy, as well as our pride and lack of humility, which breeds incivility and breaks down community.

So, how should we develop civility in the classroom?

First, **we must always remember that every person – whether they are present in the room or an abstract example – is created in God's image.** For this reason alone, every person deserves to be treated with respect. Remembering each person's inherent worth to God can help us treat each other with

gentleness and grace.

Second, **we must be eager to learn about others . . . and from them, too.** I once heard an axiom that promised that every person we meet knows something that we do not. If we are to learn what has been revealed to them, then we must enter into a trusting relationship with them. Healthy relationships, like communities, do not require absolute agreement, just civility. It is when we enter into these relationships with classmates that we get to explore the world within which they were raised, and the ideas and beliefs that have subsequently formed. It is in this place, that we begin to realize the complexity of the world God created, and how little of it we actually understand and have experienced. Here, humility and empathy are born.

Furthering our abilities to empathize is also important, and for this I encourage us all to read more.

There is something almost magical about opening up a book because it takes you to a time and a perspective that is unfamiliar. You do not just dive into someone else's voice or world, but you explore another's soul. Having access to the thoughts and feelings of a person, real or not, as they make mistakes and journey through life can help us view them in a gentler, grace-filled way. When we understand the rationale behind a person's choice, whether it is a choice we would have made for ourselves or not, we are more inclined to be empathetic – to treat that person with grace, compassion, and understanding. Reading just may be a way for us to learn and further develop our abilities to empathize.

Fourth, **we should be just as willing and quick to question ourselves as we are to question others.** It is easy for us, when presented with an opposing or controversial opinion, to begin to break down the credibility of the person with whom we are conversing. However, breaking down the person instead of the argument is not respecting of God's image in them. Also, have we considered why we hold the beliefs that we do? It is imperative to our personal development that we question ourselves and the beliefs to which we cling. We need to investigate other opinions, other perspectives, and develop our own positions according to what God has revealed to each of us through His Word and through creation. God calls each of us uniquely, and we are to be faithful to that call in our lives.

Finally, **develop and utilize humility, and also leave room to be wrong.** There will be issues that seem so black and white to us personally that we cannot begin to fathom how someone could disagree with us, let alone have a well-constructed argument defending their opinion. It may seem unconscionable, but the opinions and arguments exist, and they exist within our classrooms. Anyone willing to step up and debate ideas deserves a civil discussion. They are utilizing the complex mind with which God created for them, and that alone is honoring to our Creator. We should respond in kind. Furthermore, leaving room within our minds and arguments to be wrong does not necessarily mean that our beliefs are in a vulnerable position; all this suggests is that there is still room for the opinion to adjust and for us to grow.

Learning is a sacred, lifelong process that commences in the classroom. We need classrooms that provide safe places to learn. As a student, I urge my classmates to recognize that now is the time to begin debating and discussing that which is hard and controversial. To do this well, both students and professors must work together to form communities built on respect that encourage questioning. The only way to create a place that fosters the security needed for these honest and exploratory discussions is within a community that fosters civility as well.

Dig Deeper

March is Social Work Awareness Month. Here are more articles that focus on the discipline of social work: [“In the era of mean tweets...and much, much worse,”](#) Abby Foreman opens a discussion on what it means “to engage civilly in a world that has accepted incivility as par for the course.”

Tara Boer shares insights and encouragement for [Those Who Know a Hurting Child](#) and advice for ways

we can [Serve Families in Broken Situations](#).

Come back to iAt throughout this week to learn more about social work.